The Search for the...
On the last day of his life John Hayes, who was then 30 years old, set out to gather a few walnuts. He walked along the railroad tracks, going west from his hometown of Brooks, Iowa.

Hayes, like his three brothers, was profoundly deaf. Between mileposts 419 and 420 he was struck by a train he could not hear. In the Brooks cemetery a weathered marble tombstone bears his name, dates of birth and death, and the words “Killed by train Number 1, Nov. 27, 1892.”

Fifty years later another train, also designated Number 1, sped through the night, approaching milepost 419.

The Denver Zephyr, with 12 gleaming stainless-steel cars propelled by a pair of powerful diesel-electric engines, rolled out of Chicago late in the afternoon
of Sunday, September 13, 1942. The passengers—187 men, women, and children—enjoyed luxurious accommodations that included a comfortable lounge, observation areas, a dining car, and sleeping berths. As the train reached 80 miles per hour, engineer F. O. Paulus leveled off the throttle. Seventy-nine was the limit for Illinois and Iowa. West of Omaha, with clear tracks through the sparsely populated sand hills in the final leg of the overnight trip to the Mile High City, the train was capable of speeds in excess of 100 mph.

But not on this run. Near the halfway point of the journey, between the tiny southwest Iowa towns of Brooks and Nodaway, a man authorities would call "The Zephyr Bomber" was going about his work.

His preparations had begun at least a few days earlier. On the night of September 9 a storage shed at the nearby Adams County gravel quarry was broken into, a quantity of dynamite stolen, as were numerous electric blasting caps. Two nights later the thief returned, this time taking a hand-operated detonator designed to send an electrical spark through several hundred feet of wire. From an undetermined source the bomber obtained an assortment of used, insulated wire. Lengths of this wire—ordinary 110-volt household wire and more from doorbells and lamp cords—were spliced together and strung from the blasting machine to points at which the bundles of dynamite would be placed. Each of a dozen charges consisted of several sticks of nitro-based high explosives, spaced over a distance of 568 feet, allowing for a dozen simultaneous explosions extending from near the front of the train to the rear.

The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy (CB&Q) was a busy railroad, then having a set of double tracks over much of the route, allowing speeding trains to pass each other rather than one needing to wait on a siding.

The bomber's set-up, because it might be spotted by an earlier train, could not be fully laid out until darkness. Charges dare not be placed until the last train preceding the Zephyr had passed. The bomber had watched for days, timing the pride of the CB&Q, estimating length and speed. He set 12 charges; the train had 12 cars. The Zephyr bomber was after one train, and one train only.

The Denver Zephyr, also known as DZ and the Silver Streak, and designated "Number 1" on schedule postings, was the CB&Q's answer to the demand for

Unveiled in 1934, the streamlined Zephyr streaked across the nation in record times and soon ran several trains and routes. Here it pulls into East Dubuque, Illinois, 1940.
The image contains a photograph of a building, possibly an airport or train station, with a blurred background. There is no discernible text on the page that can be translated or described.
The train was unveiled in a highly publicized test run from Denver to Chicago during the 1934 World’s Fair. CB&Q President Ralph Budd issued press releases promising the Zephyr would shatter existing speed records, and it did. All across Iowa on May 26 schools and businesses were closed and tracks cleared, as thousands watched the train flash by on the historic dawn-to-dusk nonstop run. It traveled over 1,000 miles in 12 hours, using only about $14 worth of fuel.

The train was an immediate success, starting with three passenger cars and one 660-horsepower engine. The demand for tickets exceeded capacity. Cars were added, necessitating more horsepower. More routes and more trains soon followed. By wartime the CB&Q was operating the Twin Cities Zephyr, Mark Twain Zephyr, Ozark Zephyr, St. Louis Zephyr, and others. But the original, the Denver Zephyr, was arguably the most popular passenger train operating in the Midwest.

By 11 p.m. the Zephyr had crossed the Mississippi and was well into Iowa. Some passengers had retired, others were in the lounge reading newspaper accounts of battles on Guadalcanal, the Solomon Islands, Bataan. The siege of Stalingrad was under way. Here scrap metal and war bond drives were ongoing. Rationing of gasoline and rubber were in place, with meat projected to join the list.

The bomber was nearly ready. Wire had been arranged, splices secured. The Zephyr, he knew, would be on the north set of tracks. He had bundled the dynamite, several sticks in each, used a pointed object to make angling penetrations and inserted blasting caps, then secured the packages with a wrapping of black tape. He placed the first charge on a cross-tie between the rails, paced off just over 50 feet and placed another. When all 12 were where he wanted, he returned to the first and, probably with the aid of a flashlight tucked under his arm, went from bundle to bundle, twisting drop cord wire onto leg wires of the caps. When the dozen connections were completed, there was just one more. His blasting machine was located south of the easternmost charge, a vantage point from which he could see when the last car was passing over dynamite, knowing the first car would be as well. Below the detonator handle was a slot through which he inserted the main wire and a device to tighten the connection.

He probably heard the Zephyr before he saw it. Although the tracks were level and nearly straight, brush, timber, and a gradual curve obscured distant headlights. A thunderstorm had passed through earlier, leaving patches of heavy fog.

At a few minutes after midnight, making nearly 80 miles per hour, the engine flashed by milepost 419. An instant later, the bomber pushed the plunger.

The explosion was heard at least eight miles away. A blast of that magnitude in rural Adams County, so late at night, attracted attention. Corning residents phoned Sheriff Earl Gibson, who was accustomed to being called out. A suicide, an arson, plus more than the usual run of domestic disputes had made his previous few days long and the nights short.

He dressed, summoned his deputy—but he didn’t know where to go. Those who had heard the explosion, a dozen blasts that sounded like one, weren’t sure where the sound originated.

Passengers on the Zephyr—some only a few feet from the source, many of them asleep—heard the sound, felt the shock, a jolt. For a moment cars seemed to careen, then right themselves, shudder, roll on with a screech of metal as if the real disaster was yet to come.

Nine of the twelve cars sustained undercarriage damage; some side panels were separated. Hoses to the train’s air brakes were blown. The brakes, designed to fail in the safe position, locked. Metal grating on metal shrieked. Passengers peered through windows to see showers of sparks in the darkness. The Zephyr skidded 3,600 agonizing feet before finally coming to a stop.

Henry Heaton, lifelong resident of Brooks, was 12 years old in 1942. He remembers going to the tracks a few days later, watching as damaged cars were towed back to Chicago. The wheels, ground flat on one side, made a clunking sound with each rotation.

Had the train left the tracks, the result would have been catastrophic. Investigators concluded this did not happen because of a combination of speed, weight, and construction. The Zephyr was clad in 18-8 stainless steel, an alloy that contains 18 percent chromium and 8 percent nickel, providing a tensile strength about three times that of ordinary steel. To reduce wind resistance, underbodies of the Zephyr line were clad in the same material. While not the intent, this added layer of protection may have saved lives.

Another factor was the distribution and configuration of charges. Tracks ran approximately east and west.
The bomber had placed his first charge on a crosstie against the inside of the rail to the south, the next just inside the rail on the north, and so on, alternating over a distance of 568 feet. This had the effect of not only spreading force over the length of the train, but distributing it on both sides as well. Had the bundles been more closely spaced, concentrated, or all on the same side, the results would likely have been different.

There were, no doubt, those who simply believed they were spared by an act of providence.

With the Zephyr finally at a stop, Conductor R. C. Wells assessed damages. Grasping what had happened, Wells flagged down an eastbound freight. He instructed the freight crew to continue on with caution—another bomb might lie up the line—and to let station agents know the fate of his train. He then walked to a nearby farmhouse and placed a series of phone calls.

The search for the Zephyr bomber was about to begin.

Investigators from four agencies would work together and, although there developed a pattern of dissension, the combined resources were impressive. The CB&Q Railroad Police, headed by Chief Special Agent W. G. Fetzner, had detectives, deep pockets, and a network that extended beyond their own railroad. Fetzner could, and often did, request and receive assistance from his counterparts with other railroads. The Federal Bureau of Investigation had pockets even more spacious than the CB&Q’s, well-trained field agents, a forensic laboratory second to none, and J. Edgar Hoover at the helm. The Iowa Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BCI) was headed by R. W. “Doc” Nebergall, a career law enforcement officer often referred to in newspapers as “Iowa’s J. Edgar Hoover.” Sheriff Gibson knew the area, the back roads, the people.

These men were committed to doing whatever was necessary to apprehend the bomber. To the FBI this was a wartime act of sabotage, a matter of national security. Sheriff Gibson, facing stiff competition in the November election, could benefit from a quick arrest. To the BCI this was an attempt to murder 200 people. For the CB&Q the bombing threatened to bring about a public loss of confidence in rail transit. Three years earlier, near Harney, Nevada, the San Francisco Zephyr had been derailed, killing 24 and injuring 121. Authorities ruled the cause to be sabotage. This sort of publicity was not good for the railroad.

Various reasons for wanting a quick closure were underscored when, just three days after the bombing, a letter was received from a person claiming responsibility, warning that “next time it may be worse.”

With an abundance of dedicated officers, a plethora of clues, odds seemed to favor justice. Although the amount of DuPont dynamite stolen was uncertain (inventories had not been closely maintained), the source seemed clear—the storage shed at the Adams County quarry. The shed was only five miles from the crime scene and a couple of hundred feet from the CB&Q tracks. Footprints led from the storage building to the tracks.

At the scene of the explosion, investigators found remnants of blasting caps, as well as several hundred feet of wire extending from the detonator to the charges. The detonator, also identified as being stolen from the quarry, was found where it had been tossed into the brush near the scene. Footprints in the mud indicated only one person had fired the charge.

There were other clues. Several witnesses, including area farmers and a railroad section crew, had seen a man on or near the tracks in the days prior to the bombing. None got close enough to give a description and so dismissed him as a vagrant or hobo.

At about 11 p.m. on Saturday, the night before the bombing, a train crew had noted a fire on the south side of the tracks. The fire was small, did not appear to be a threat, and the train passed on. Investigators later found ashes and a partially burned wooden box a few yards west of the scene. The box had dove-tailed corners, consistent with containers dynamite manufacturers used for shipment.

Two teenagers, 17-year-old Ilene McMurray of Brooks and her boyfriend, Frank Houchin, were in a parked car near the tracks in Brooks from late Sunday night until about 2 a.m. Monday. Both saw the Zephyr pass by, heard the explosion moments later. McMurray told of seeing a car coming from the south and west a few minutes later. The car, make and model unknown, went north out of town. Some investigators believed the bomber made his escape in this vehicle.

Early attention was focused on employees of the quarry. A number of them knew how to use dynamite, a few were alleged to have made incriminating or anti-government statements, and there was some suspicion that the burglaries might have been an inside job. The quarry had about 50 employees, and all would be questioned.

One of them, Oliver Swain, was an acquaintance of Merle “Barney” Agnew, and for a time agents thought they were onto something. Agnew, who did live main-
tenance for the Nodaway telephone company, had previously worked on a railroad crew. He'd been laid off, was said to be bitter about it. Agnew supplemented his income by doing electrical wiring. Several people stated that when he did these jobs he sometimes asked for their used wire. The local depot agent said he'd heard Agnew, a few months before the bombing, say that someone "should blow up the damned railroad."

His wife was the Nodaway telephone operator, and the couple lived in what was called the central office.

The subsequent interrogation of Agnew led to a nasty spat between FBI and BCI agents, an eruption of the undercurrent of dissension present almost from the beginning. BCI Agent R. F. Gregson's report of September 17 said that FBI agents had "questioned several people but did not immediately tell the BCI."
This, Gregson made clear, resulted in confusion and duplication.

He was further miffed that the anonymous letter received by the Omaha World-Herald was promptly turned over to the FBI, who then kept it to themselves, his report reads, "for a few hours."

Investigators were not sure what to make of the letter. The envelope was postmarked September 15, on the mail car of an eastbound train that had left Denver that afternoon. Because bags of mail were picked up by moving trains at towns all along the route, it was not possible to determine where it had been mailed. Officers narrowed the origin to a few cities in Nebraska—possibly Lincoln—
but could never be completely certain. While the address was crudely printed, the contents were in a tight, neat cursive. The purple three-cent stamp with perforated edges was a type that had not been sold for two years. The writer dated the letter September 13. The bombing happened after midnight, during the early morning of the 14th.

Editor, Omaha World Herald  
this is why I wrecked the Zephyr  
I didn’t want to hurt anybody this time. But it may be different next time. I have given 2 boys to the U.S.A. all I have to give. Many more Americans like me have given more. I have always paid my taxes and debts. don’t owe anybody a cent. all I know is what I read in the papers, my blood boils when I see people spending money for pleasure and just riding over the country having a good time, when our boys are giving their lives for U.S.A. out at Battan, they were 2 inches of american blood on the warfs, our men who were left alive were slipping around in it, getting the wounded ones in. then when I see so many people going by every day on the trains, I just can not stand it. My blood boils. So I just had to do it. Next time it will be worse. Our boys going to war, riding on any old train and the people going for pleasure riding on the fastest trains and the best trains when the men at the front are calling for more help and more material. It just about kills me to see these fast trains go by, with just a lot of people going for pleasure and spending the money that should be given to the U.S.A. for war bonds. there is lots of other farmers around here, thinks like me. next time it may be worse and some other place.  
I am an american

Was the letter legitimate? Written by the bomber? If so, claiming that he didn’t want to hurt anyone seemed absurd—blowing several dozen sticks of dynamite under a speeding passenger train was hardly a benign gesture. So, were there other lies as well? Had he accurately depicted himself as an area farmer who had given two sons to the war effort? No single family from Adams County had two sons killed during the war. There were several, however, who had two or more inducted. Or was the letter a ruse to send investigators in the wrong direction?

A facsimile of the letter and transcription appeared on the front page of the Omaha World-Herald and the Adams County Free Press. The Free Press pointed out that “the writer did not cross most of his t’s” and that “the letter was written in pencil on plain typewriter paper with the water-mark ‘Serv-Wel.'”

The letter writer had threatened three times to repeat his actions and that “next time it may be worse.” There was little choice but to take the letter seriously and see where it led, which meant scores of people would have their handwriting compared.

One of the first was Merle Agnew. Another was an area farmer named Roy Northup. Northup had sons in the military, a consideration because of the reference in the letter to giving “2 boys to the U.S.A.” Northup was also an acquaintance of Agnew, and it was revealed that he had had a phone conversation with Agnew the day after the crime. An eavesdropper on the phone line, according to a BCI report, had heard the following:

“Barney?”
“Yes?”
“Have they found anything?”
“I don’t know.”

Northup was then alleged to have said: “If they knew as much about Nodaway as we did they wouldn’t have much trouble finding out.”

Agnew caused unnecessary problems by giving several conflicting statements. One consistent and uncontested theme was that he was drunk on Sunday, September 13. He bought his whiskey, three pints at various times throughout the day, from a salvage yard operator in Villisca. He then went to Villisca with Oliver Swain. In one statement he said he went alone. In another he avowed he met a man who said he was going to blow up a train and have Agnew blamed for it.

Sheriff Gibson, probably at Gregson’s request, arrested Agnew and charged him with bootlegging (at the time in Iowa, liquor could only be legally purchased from state liquor stores, which were not open on Sunday). He was jailed over the weekend, giving officers the opportunity to resume interrogation at their pleasure. During one of these sessions, with CB&Q Agent Fetzner present, two FBI agents barged unannounced into the room. They had sharp words for Gregson. Gregson did not apologize for leaving the FBI out, saying his intent was to notify them immediately “if anything developed.”

Nebergall and Fetzner exchanged letters expressing the importance of agency cooperation and hinting at displeasure with FBI agents. If J. Edgar Hoover knew a quarrel was brewing he may not have cared. At one point the Secret Service made an attempt to get involved, suggesting that President Roosevelt traveled by train and therefore the Zephyr bombing was within
their jurisdiction. Their request to be a part of the FBI investigation was denied. The FBI viewed this as their case, one that Hoover took a personal interest in. There was no credible evidence against Agnew. He and Northup submitted to a polygraph and handwriting analysis and were cleared.

A

nd so, one after one, were other local suspects. Investigators cast a wider net. Agents canvassed hotels, boarding houses, resorts, and lodging places as far as 40 miles from the scene, compiling a list of every person who had registered between the dates of September 6 and 15. Clerks and managers apprised them of most every boarding who was perceived to have acted oddly or suspiciously—lengthy list. All were checked out. Disgruntled railroad employees were questioned. George Washington Squire, a 35-year employee of the CB&Q.

Background:
A facsimile of the bomber’s letter appeared in the Adams County Free Press on September 24. The paper emphasized that it was readers’ “patriotic duty” to assist the investigators in their attempt to find this “menace.”

Foreground:
On an FBI memo regarding the bomber’s letter, director J. Edgar Hoover scrawled, “We must bear down on this & locate writer of note.”

Sommer
a father of five with an unblemished work record, was hauled in for interrogation because an agent thought his handwriting appeared similar to that in the letter. A polygraph examiner and handwriting expert said no, and the case moved on.

Some of the leads pointed to the bizarre, none more so than a tip that the Hayes brothers of Brooks deserved a close look. The four Hayes boys—John, Samuel, Albert, and Clarence—born between 1862 and 1880, were not blessed with good fortune. Their sisters had normal hearing, had married, raised families. The boys entered the world profoundly deaf. None ever married. A few days after Thanksgiving in 1892, John, the oldest, was struck and killed by a train between mileposts 419 and 420.

In the fall of 1928, 48-year-old Clarence was crossing the tracks near the Brooks depot. Likewise incapable of hearing an oncoming train, he was run over. He lay along the tracks for more than two hours before being found. He lost both legs above the knees.

In the summer of 1942, Clarence found a fruit jar containing a quantity of blasting caps. He would later say he did not know what they were. At about the same time his brother Sam picked up a single cap. Sam didn’t know what he had and tried to pry it apart with a nail. The explosion removed the better part of two fingers.

Certain Brooks residents took notice: The Hayes brothers, with one killed and two maimed by a train, had reason to dislike the railroad. Just weeks before the bombing, two of them were in possession of a blasting component. Albert had a past conviction for breaking components. Albert had a past conviction for breaking. Albert had a past conviction for breaking.

Nebergall assigned Agents Gregson and Delbert Murray, who were joined by a CB&Q detective. Their first attempt to question the Hayes brothers did not go well. Agents didn’t know sign language and the brothers had trouble reading their written questions. Officers returned a few days later with a man who knew sign and a lengthy session ensued. While being questioned about trains, one of the brothers went to another room in the squalid shack they called home and returned with a handful of clippings. Through the years he had been collecting newspaper articles and pictures of train wrecks.

They were asked direct questions: Did they steal dynamite? Did they bomb the train? Did they know who did? No, no, and no. Clarence responded to a question about the wire by writing that he was trying to build a wind generator that would operate a single light bulb. Their home had no electricity.

Questioning continued. Albert insisted they go see his sister, Sarah Cunningham, their legal guardian. She confirmed much of what her siblings had conveyed, adding that after Sam’s mishap she took the remaining caps from Clarence and threw them in the river.

Agent Murray, typing his own report, opined that Sarah Cunningham “is the smartest one of the family and wants to get things wright.” In the end it was concluded that Sam, who was short two fingers, did not know enough about explosives to be seriously considered. Clarence, an amputee, lacked the mobility to get to the scene and do the work. This left 65-year-old Albert. Accompanied by an interpreter, Albert was taken to Fetzner’s polygraph examiner. He passed.

Either the FBI did not know the BCI had cleared the Hayes brothers, or they placed no faith in their conclusion. A few weeks later two federal agents traveled to Brooks, and the brothers were interrogated once again.

Fiction between agencies continued. On October 23 Fetzner, for the CB&Q, sent a tersely worded letter asking that wire used in the explosion, which had been taken to the FBI lab, be returned. His reason was that field agents wanted to show the rather unusual combination to area residents on the chance that someone might know where it came from. Fetzner’s wording indicates the FBI originally agreed, then decided more testing was needed. Fetzner left no doubt—he thought they’d had the wire long enough.

Fetzner didn’t know, but the FBI lab was doing remarkable things with the bundles of wire. They determined some had been used outdoors, some inside. They classified the insulation, counted strands in lamp cord wire, traced some to the manufacturer. On a section of 110-volt household wire was a smear of aluminum-colored paint, which was carefully scraped and retained for comparison. The lab identified the tools used to cut the wire and peel back the insulation. Had they explained this, Fetzner might have been more understanding.

If Iowa law enforcement officers found the FBI difficult, local residents did as well. Francis Mack of Corn-ing, then a boy who spent time in his father’s downtown hardware store, remembers the agents dressed alike in suits called “suntans.” Their high-handed behavior, he recalled, made it apparent that they had a lofty opinion of themselves.
Henry Heaton is more specific. "They questioned my dad at the bank in Brooks, wanting information on people, and came back several times." Ivan Heaton told them what he could, Henry recounts, but agents weren’t satisfied and returned over and again, asking the same questions. He describes FBI representatives as arrogant and demanding, telling of his father becoming offended, ordering them to get out of his bank and not come back. (An FBI report filed in late September says Heaton was interviewed several times because, as a banker, he had knowledge of area buildings that had been recently torn down or renovated. They were hopeful this might lead to the source of the wires.)

Fetzner must have strongly believed in the polygraph, as in the weeks following the crime he used it on the remotest of suspects and witnesses. Even Winfred Agnew, Nodaway’s telephone operator, had her turn on the box. Nearly everyone tested was cleared, although a few were inconclusive.

Time was passing. The only apparent progress was through the elimination of suspects. Turning to experts in commercial explosives and blasting techniques, investigators reassessed the abilities of the Zephyr bomber. Splicing wire of varying lengths and gauges, then setting the charge in a manner that required the blasting machine to simultaneously deliver adequate current to multiple caps spaced over a long distance was not, experts agreed, the way they would have done it. The likelihood that one or more charges would fail to detonate was high. And yet they had all blown. A representative of the Trojan Powder Company summed up the feelings of many when he said the bomber was either very fortunate or knew more than he’d been originally credited with.

As 1943 began, Fetzner, seeing the trail grow colder, contemplated doubling the CB&Q’s initial reward of $500. He debated with Neborgall regarding the wisdom of doing so. Investigators had been cautiously selective of what they released to the media. The Adams County Free Press, in their September 17 lead story, made it plain that the paper was printing only what authorities authorized, and that “rules of war time censorship apply.” Investigators asked newspapers to remind the public of their patriotic duty “to assist officers in every way,” but gave out very little information. News stories on the bombing ceased within days.

Raising the reward to $1,000 was of little benefit without publicity, so the question was whether the slim chance of results was worth putting the story back on the front page. The decision was made, and in late January Fetzner issued a news release announcing that the reward had been doubled.

More potential, if unpromising, suspects were questioned in February, March, and April. Then in May came a curious development. A 16-year-old boy named Chester Wilfong was hunting along the tracks near milepost 418, just over a mile from the bombing site. He found two sticks of dynamite, one of which had an electric blasting cap inserted. Both were manufactured by DuPont, as was that stolen from the quarry. While the dynamite was weathered from exposure, identifying markings remained legible. Investigators were sure these sticks figured into the bombing, but why were they a mile east of where the charge had been set?

It was also in May that a former CB&Q employee, a section gang worker named Homer Peairs, came under scrutiny. He had been fired and was reportedly not happy about it. Fetzner assigned detective L. H. Pencil to check him out, doing so undercover. Peairs was traced to Portland, Oregon, where he was working at a paper mill. Pencil went to the paper mill, intending to get a job at the same plant and to befriend Peairs. Pencil arrived to learn that agents of the FBI had been there two days earlier and had interrogated him directly. Peairs immediately quit his job, and plant management did not know his whereabouts. Once again the feds had upset Fetzner’s plans.

Pencil persisted, learned that Peairs had taken a job on a ranch near La Grande. Pencil, posing as a cowboy, applied for work. He was hired, but before he could approach Peairs, the man was fired for drunkenness. The FBI had cleared Peairs to their satisfaction, and Fetzner called a halt to Pencil’s undercover operation.

While certain Iowa officers may not have lavished fondness on certain FBI agents, there was no questioning the proficiency of their lab. They took possession of the dynamite found by Wilfong and, over the next few weeks, established that an earlier assumption was wrong.

The two sticks were not a part of the dynamite sold to and stored at the Adams County quarry, but were instead part of a shipment to the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad in Colorado. Pursuing this, the FBI found that all dynamite in this shipment was manufactured by DuPont, as that stolen from the quarry, and had an electric blasting cap inserted. Both were manufactured by DuPont, as was that stolen from the quarry. While the dynamite was weathered from exposure, identifying markings remained legible. Investigators were sure these sticks figured into the bombing, but why were they a mile east of where the charge had been set?
Investigators concluded that the dynamite stolen in Colorado a few days before the bombing had been transported to Iowa, after which the bomber decided it was not enough. He then took an additional amount from the Adams County quarry. This opened a new phase—investigating railroad maintenance crew members who worked in Colorado, as well as anyone who had moved or traveled between Concrete and southwest Iowa. One by one, every person identified was cleared.

The FBI’s probe into the Colorado connection continued for years, involving agents in several western states. An anonymous letter written to the railroad before the bombing claimed that an employee of the Granada Relocation Center, a Japanese American internment camp located near Granada, Colorado, was planning to wreck a train. The camp, according to an FBI report, employed several hundred people, many of whom had moved on. It took the FBI hundreds of man-hours to check them all.

On a spring day in 1944, a section crew doing track maintenance found a small metal tag along the right-of-way near milepost 420. It bore the name Cam Campbell, Jr. and a Social Security number. Fetzner and Nebergall exchanged letters. Neither had any idea who Cam Campbell was, and the Social Security administration refused to disclose their records, even to the FBI. Iowa agents scoured towns in Adams and surrounding counties, looking for anyone who knew a person named Cam Campbell.

By 1946, four years had elapsed since the Zephyr bombing and not an arrest had been made. The thought that the perpetrator could have been a Nazi saboteur was not a new one. Fetzner knew that postwar military intelligence was delving into the inner workings of the Third Reich and disclosing details of teams trained in sabotage and sent to the United States. He learned that a German saboteur named George Daasch had been arrested and was in custody at the federal penitentiary in Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. He made arrangements to question Daasch.

Fetzner’s report of this session is not conclusive. Daasch acknowledged acts of sabotage in the U.S., but none involving trains. He said he had never heard of the Zephyr. He looked at diagrams of the dynamite configuration and told Fetzner it did not appear to be the work of a trained saboteur. Fetzner was not convinced. Nazi operatives were not necessarily truthful and there was, at that point, not much else.

The FBI was not impressed by Fetzner. A memo from a bureau administrator to Hoover dated April 19, 1946, includes the following: “Since Sept. 14, 1942, we have been investigating the wreck of the Denver Zephyr. We have had over a period of several years considerable trouble with the railroad Special Agents on the case.”

The case went cold for two more years. Then, in April 1948, 67-year-old James Rhoades, resident of a Des Moines flop house, contacted authorities. He hadn’t done the bombing, he said, but he knew conspirators who had and who were trying to blame him. He gave several accounts, none of which proved plausible.

Fetzner persisted with the sabotage angle. In September one of his letters was answered by Major Clifford Townsend, an assistant adjutant general in army intelligence in Europe. Townsend wrote of two men who had been held and questioned and were cooperating: Reinhold Barth and Ernst Burger. Barth, a former railway engineer employed by the German high command as an advisor, became an instructor at the Nazis’ sabotage school in Brandenburg. Burger was a student. Barth was later part of a team sent on a failed mission to the U.S. If the Zephyr was a Nazi target, Fetzner felt, one of these men would likely know.

Given photos and details of the incident, Barth said the bombing had not been done by anyone he trained. The attempt, he said, was dangerous as well as “clumsy and inefficient.” Besides, he concluded, German operatives were trained in “subtle sabotage,” meaning the results of their work would appear to be an accident.

Fetzner shared what he had learned. Shortly thereafter he received a sharply worded letter from the FBI office in Des Moines. The letter makes it clear that the FBI had previously determined the Zephyr bombing was not the result of a Nazi plot, and that Fetzner would do well to cease in that pursuit. Fetzner’s documents in the BCI files do not mention the Nazi angle again.

Three more years passed. Then in January of 1951, Jack Calvin Kelley—a drifter with a history of vagrancy and intoxication—was picked up by Omaha police for a minor offense. While in custody he told officers he was the Zephyr bomber. Iowa and CB&Q agents were dispatched. Before questioning him they learned he was an itinerant, rode the rails in the 1930s and ‘40s, and was a regular at city jails in the Midwest, as he often called on police stations asking for a place to spend the night. The incident he claimed to have knowledge of was the 1939 wreck of the San Francisco Zephyr. His story was long and rambling and made little sense. All, including the FBI, concluded that he had nothing to do with either incident.
With Kelley cleared, BCI Director Nebergall resumed his pursuit of the man named Cam Campbell. Thwarted in his attempts to persuade the Social Security Administration to release information associated with the number on the tag found by the section gang, he tried another tactic. Nebergall composed a letter, making reference to a “major crime” and asking for any information regarding Campbell. He sent it to his counterparts in every state in the Union.

Responses started arriving in June. Most were negative, but there were a lot of Campbells with criminal records who were either called Cam or had the first name Cameron, Camden, or Clarence. One had done time during the 1930s in the Iowa State Penitentiary at Fort Madison. Other possible matches were reported in Oregon, California, and Florida.

After a considerable amount of legwork it was determined that the Campbell they were looking for lived in Florida. He turned out to be a solid citizen and a masonry contractor. He told investigators he had been issued his Social Security card as a teenager. Cautioned against losing the original card, he’d given it to his mother for safe-keeping, then had the metal tag made to carry with him. Sometime during 1938 or ’39 the tag was either lost or stolen, and he hadn’t seen it since. He was inducted into the army a month before the bombing. His story and alibi were solid. Cam Campbell was not the bomber.

Thirteen years after the crime, Nebergall, still pursuing leads, wrote Fetzner of his frustration in solving “this case, which is still in my hair.”

There was another flurry of activity in the spring of 1956, when a man named Clarence Campbell was killed in Chicago. Campbell was carrying a dynamite bomb. He was walking on a street along which wire had been stretched to deter pedestrians from stepping onto newly seeded grass. Campbell tripped over the wire, his fall causing the bomb to detonate.

Nebergall grasped the lead as if it was the last card in the deck, which, in fact, it was. He’d had the name Campbell on his mind since the Social Security tag was found in 1944. It had taken seven years to write that off and now, five years later, the name Campbell surfaced again. Once again the chase was on. Once again it went nowhere. The Campbell killed in Chicago was undoubtedly a dangerous character, but no evidence was found that connected him to the Zephyr bombing.

Although the statute of limitations had long since been exceeded, Nebergall and Fetzner never gave up. They simply reached the point at which there were no stones left to turn. In 1958 Nebergall retired from the BCI. The case was never reopened.

Investigators grown old will reminisce with their trophies, but in the gray hours of night it is their failures that awaken them. How often did those who labored on a futile effort think of the Zephyr bomber, wondering what they had missed? Why did he not strike again? Or had he, in some way they were unaware of? Had the bomber been in their grasp but beaten an unreliable polygraph? Or had they even been close?

There were so many clues, all pointing to someone. And so many basic questions—Was the Zephyr bomber a calculating saboteur or a despondent transient? Someone who hated the railroad or the government, or was out to get a passenger on the Zephyr? Was he very good or very lucky? All these remain unanswered.

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Researching FBI Files

Roy Marshall is the author of Villisca: The True Account of the Unsolved 1912 Mass Murder that Stunned the Nation (2003). During Marshall’s long career with the Iowa Department of Public Safety, he was trained by the FBI in hazardous explosive devices. Years later, he came across an old newspaper article about the Zephyr bombing. Knowing there was much more than what authorities chose to release, he filed a Freedom of Information Act with the FBI and a similar one with the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI). He writes: “Both agencies cooperated fully. The depth of their investigation indicates how important officers at the time felt this case was. The FBI file comprised 6,754 pages; the DCI’s was nearly as large.”

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NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources for this article include files acquired by the author from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation (see paragraph on left). Records from the Adams County Sheriff’s Office were helpful as were several personal interviews and Brooks History (Brooks, Iowa: Brooks United Methodist Church, 2008).

Coverage of the bombing and investigation appeared in the Adams County Free Press, Villisca Review, Red Oak Express, Council Bluffs Nonpareil, and Omaha World-Herald.

Regarding the 1939 derailment of the City of San Francisco, there were, and remain, those who believe the derailment was an accident caused by a loose rail. Ownership, the theory goes, induced authorities to rule sabotage in order to avoid lawsuits. However, investigators of the 1942 Zephyr bombing, including the FBI, which investigated both, made repeated references to the 1939 tragedy as being a criminal act.

Annotations to the original manuscript are held in the Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files (SHSI-Iowa City).